

## Probing Television and Media Education

Cecilia L. Lazaro

*U.P. Gawad Plaridel 2007 Awardee*

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*For 2007, the U.P. Gawad Plaridel award was given to Cecilia “Cheche” L. Lazaro for her outstanding contributions to the local television industry; her excellence and versatility in the field of television broadcasting as a broadcast journalist, producer, and media educator; and her production of critical and uncompromising programs that set the standards for Philippine broadcast journalism.*

*As was the case with the past awardees, Lazaro read this paper during the U.P. Gawad Plaridel Paggawad at Lektyur on July 4, 2007 at the U.P. Film Institute Cine Adarna. More than 1,000 people attended the event, among them National Artist for Sculpture Napoleon V. Abueva; U.P. President Emerlinda R. Roman; U.P. Diliman Chancellor Sergio S. Cao; Former U.P. President Emanuel Soriano and wife Angelica A. Soriano; U.P. Board of Regent member Nelia T. Gonzalez; U.P. Faculty Regent Lourdes U. Barcnas; U.P. Vice President for Administration Arlene Samaniego; U.P. Vice President for Development Ruperto P. Alonzo; U.P. Vice President for Public Affairs Cristina P. Hidalgo; U.P. Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs Florinda D.F. Mateo; U.P. Diliman Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Elizabeth L. Enriquez; U.P. College of Music Dean Ramon Ma. G. Acoymo; U.P. Center for Women Studies Director Carol Sobritchea; 2006 U.P. Gawad Plaridel awardee Fidela Magpayo; Ayala Corporation Capital CEO Delfin L. Lazaro; ABS-CBN Head for News and Current Affairs Maria Ressa; ABS-CBN Head of News Gathering Group Charie Villa; Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility Deputy Director Luis V. Teodoro; Foundation for Worldwide People Power President Maria Lim-Ayuyao; Museo Pambata President and CEO Christina Lim-Yuson; Cultural Center of the Philippines President Nestor O. Jardin; Probe Foundation, Inc. Executive Director Yasmin Mapua-Tang; Ateneo de Manila University professor and television host Mercedes Fajardo-Robles; television hosts Bernadette Sembrano and Love Añover; artist Robert Alejandro; faculty members and mass*

*communication students of U.P.; and officials, faculty members, and students of AMA Computer University, Assumption College, Ateneo de Manila University, Feati University, Miriam College, Philippine Women's University, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Quezon City Polytechnic University, St. Scholastica's College, Trinity University of Asia, University of the East, and the University of Santo Tomas.*

*The pre-show was anchored by 2007 Binibining Pilipinas Universe Ma. Anna Theresa L. Licaros while the main program was hosted by NBN's Tinig ng Bayan hosts Mario Garcia and Marinela Aseron (who is also a faculty member of U.P. CMC's Department of Broadcast Communication). The live program was directed by U.P. Film Institute assistant professor and television director Roehl L. Jamon.*

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Cecilia L. Lazaro (third from left) receives the U.P. Gawad Plaridel trophy from (left to right) U.P. Diliman Chancellor Sergio S. Cao, U.P. President Emerlinda R. Roman, and U.P. College of Mass Communication Dean Elena E. Pernia. Photo courtesy of the 2007 U.P. Gawad Plaridel Audio-Visual Team.

**I**n behalf of my family, *The Probe Team*, my colleagues in P and in the industry who have all contributed at different stages in my career to get me on this stage today, I thank you for this distinct honor and recognition as the fourth U.P. Gawad Plaridel Awardee. It is like a homecoming for me because this is where I started my journey in broadcasting.

It has been 20 years since we first thought of the idea of putting together an investigative newsmagazine for television. In those 20 years, the ride has at different times been uncertain, exhilarating, many times bumpy, but always challenging.

Our very first challenge in 1987 was how to get on the air. We had an idea and the determination to make it succeed. But it seemed like we were the only ones who thought we could make it work. What we wanted to do was unfamiliar territory and we were met with a lot of skepticism about whether there was an audience

to attract advertisers to pay for a show that deals with issues. We were like a bunch of amateurs trying to get into the big league. We set up shop in my eight-year old son's bedroom, transcribed interviews by long hand, and doubled up as production assistants, interviewers, editors and directors – all four of us for our weekly show. Twenty years later, we are more efficient but what has not changed is the fire in our collective bellies. Now, the challenge is how to stay on air in the face of all the changes that have been happening locally and globally.

This afternoon, I would like to direct your attention to three points: the changing media landscape, the challenges facing us as practitioners and educators, and the best practices that we want to infuse into our fast evolving industry.

When we first started in 1987, our main focus was getting a show together for mainstream TV, appealing to an audience whose main media source came from only three streams – print, radio and TV. Of the three, TV was the baby, having been brought to the Philippines in 1953, a young medium then at 34 years old.

In a way, I grew up with TV in the same way that many of you here today have grown up with the computer. It was the “new” toy in the store and the fascination with the new thing was evident. I remember being fascinated by it. Our family had a small, black-and-white TV set and programming was limited to re-reruns of *I Love Lucy*, *Lassie*, and *Gunsmoke*, canned programs that were imported from the US. For the newscast we had Bob Stewart, the original owner of today's Channel 7, reading news items off a newspaper as he sat behind a desk being shot by a single camera.

But I was not alone in being fascinated by the medium. Many years later in the 1970s, I remember my two-year old daughter Lisa who had a daily diet of *Sesame Street* in living color, standing from her baby chair where I sat her every morning, and walking towards the TV set, touching the screen and then going behind the set to see if she could talk to Mr. Snuffleopagus inside the TV set. She was also fascinated by this small box with people moving inside it. It is a constant reminder to me of what media guru and high

priest of pop culture Marshall McLuhan said about the medium being the message.

As I grew up, TV became more and more the medium to watch. Black and white turned full color; local programs came on the air. In 1962, Boots Anson-Roa hosted a teenybopper dance show called *Dance-O-Rama*. Archie Lacson taught everyone to dance the cha-cha on *Dancetime With Chito* and even *Gunsmoke* turned full color.

Back to 1987. At that time, the country was enjoying its newfound press freedom after the Marcoses fled. The programming diet focused on what I call the musical-variety “*tanga*” shows—mainly song-and-dance numbers. A smattering of talk shows suddenly found themselves free to talk about what they had tried to discuss with great caution during the Marcos dictatorship.

By this time, news had transformed from reading items from a newspaper to a formal newscast, but not in the way we know today. For many years before 1972, the newscast was more of a gap-filler, coming in only when time allowed or when all the choice programs had already run their length. It was in 1972 during martial law when the Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster sa Pilipinas (KBP) under Ka Doroy Valencia laid down a rule that all newscasts on all channels had to come on at 7 p.m. to allow advertising revenue to go to news since otherwise, no one would put their money on a newscast. If there is one thing that broadcast practitioners should probably be grateful for, it is this rule that finally put news on the regular TV programming schedule.

When news became “compulsory,” it suddenly became a glamorous job. No longer relegated to the irregularly scheduled show, newscasters assumed a high profile; news anchors became the prime movers of news on camera. They were the only ones seen and heard on the air. There was no such animal as reporter then. The “reporter” was a gatherer of news, going out to get the facts but not reporting it. The first batch of field reporters came from radio. If at all, they were only seen in video cutaways just to establish that the station had sent out a person to cover an event.

One of the first reporters on record is Orly Mercado who was then a radioman of the popular *Radyo Patrol* and Tony Lozano who continues to pound the beat to this day.

It was only in the early 1980s when reporters began to resemble what we now see on our screens. They were given stories to cover and went on camera owning the stories themselves. This was a welcome change. Reporters were empowered to go after the story as they saw fit.

As the viewers' fascination for TV grew, so did its popularity. Today, surveys tell us that TV is now the main source of information with radio and print trailing behind (Probe Media Foundation, 2004). It has also become the most credible. The findings are interesting in the face of criticisms that TV has become sensational, arrogant, and biased. To be sure, the medium is faced with many challenges because of its changing landscape and the keen competition that keeps the gatekeepers on their toes to stay alive.

The obsession with ratings was not a major influence at the time we came on TV. Today, however, in some cases, it has become the end-all and be-all. When competition was narrowed down to two stations, it took on more prominence and performance trackers have since kept an eagle eye on the numbers. Ratings are a good indicator of who is watching you and the profile of those viewers. As producers, the goal is to be watched by as many viewers as possible and ratings help you determine the direction you are taking. However, I posit that there is a downside to the obsession with ratings. If you get caught in the vortex of a ratings tornado you end up producing programs and adding elements just to rate, sometimes leaving many good stories by the wayside.

They say that competition keeps us alert and on our toes. While that is certainly a good way to keep our adrenaline pumping, it also pressures us to do things that, under normal circumstances, we would find in poor taste. There has to be a consciousness about the effect of what we do on our audience. It is the other half of the race to be first. It is our obligation to be responsible.

More than any other time in our TV history, we now think in terms of exclusives. Our newscasts are punctuated by “exclusives”. Perhaps it is time to review what the intrinsic value of an exclusive is and, more importantly, how our choices of exclusives affect the audiences we reach. One vivid example is an “exclusive” about two women involved in a hair-pulling incident. It may be worthwhile to ask ourselves what value this has as a news story aside from the riveting human drama of two women tearing at each other’s hair. Or one story of recent memory is the continuing saga of the Ruffa-Yilmaz break-up, which stayed with the major newscasts on a daily, telenovela basis. What is the take-out of viewers? Are we doing this just to attract our audience, or keep up with competition? Is there a lesson to be learned? Today, showbiz news is part of every newscast. Admittedly, the bottomline is enhanced by showbiz news. While showbiz news is strong in form, it has to be given context and careful, responsible thought.

Just in this morning’s news, a newsreader from MSNBC, Mika Brzezinski, tore up the script for the news about the Paris Hilton story, demonstrating her disgust with the editorial judgment of her producers to headline the story again.

The advent of what we now call “tabloid TV stories” began in the Western world sometime in 1987. TV programs like *A Current Affair*, *Hard Copy*, and *Inside Edition* changed the way they told stories. They focused on the details and blew them up. These programs were labeled sensational (Ressa, 2007).

Tabloid TV stories are always personal – beginning with a case study. Like the hair-pulling incident and the Ruffa-Yilmaz story, details were blown up and milked for all their worth. The tabloid newscast has become the norm. Fast cuts, stinger music to punctuate headlines, fast zooms in and out, and zingers criss-crossing the screen. Even the manner of delivery has been re-defined. When reading the news, words are heavily punctuated in the same manner that you would announce a catastrophe, spiels are delivered at a faster clip, oftentimes with a sing-song pattern, the tone more racy and the high tension palpable. I find it difficult

to reconcile this mode of delivery with the basic characteristic of TV. Because of the intimacy of the medium, you enter into the private spaces of people. It is a conversation you want to engender, not a lecture or a speech delivered in an auditorium. I should like to think that TV is like talking to one person on the other side of the camera. It begs the question: do audiences want it or have they gotten used to it?

If tabloid journalism is here to stay, the challenge is to strike a balance. To acknowledge that audience tastes have changed, competition pushes us to revise our traditional views of how to tell a good story. The story has to progress faster, more dramatically by focusing on one persons' story to show the bigger picture. Take good elements and craft a new blend. Do away with the excesses and focus on what is important.

There is a new concept called "Me journalism" introduced by Fox TV. Studies show that today, viewers want TV reporters with an attitude, an opinion about the story they are doing, quite apart from the cold detachment of the traditional way of doing a story. We see shades of this in reports that are not just about a story but about the journalist as well. The guiding principle is that every element in storytelling revolves around the story. Now, the reporter becomes a selling point as well. It is a radical deviation from what we were schooled in. It blurs the line that divides fact from opinion and treads dangerously on misleading the public you are supposed to inform.

We are often reminded that with great power comes great responsibility. A medium is a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways. And we make that decision every time we put a story together.

How well do we demonstrate this capability to wield this power given to us on a temporary basis? How prepared are our young journalists to handle this responsibility as they join the "real world?"

When I was a student, I had this funny thought. I told myself that if I ever taught Broadcast Communication, I would



Lazaro delivers the Plaridel Lecture during the 2007 U.P. Gawad Plaridel Paggawad at Lektyur held on July 4, 2007 at the U.P. Cine Adarna. Photo courtesy of the 2007 U.P. Gawad Plaridel Audio-Visual Team.

make sure that I practiced what I taught and pass on what I learned in the field to my students. But unfortunately for my students, I became a teacher first before becoming a practitioner.

That funny thought entered my mind because, as a student, we were learning broadcasting through books with a very academic approach. I remember knowing the parts of the microphone but never having seen one. Not bad, but I felt that to really learn to be a surgeon, you have to experience what it is to be in the operating room.

In broadcasting, I felt that, like the case of a good medical surgeon, the real skill belonged to the reporter on the field who had to think on her feet, make decisions about where an interview was going, and craft a story on the run. It was a question of credibility and those stripes had to be earned in the field just like a soldier earned his or hers on the battleground. The anchor's job is glamorous and cushy but not half as fun or fulfilling.

One of the subjects I was asked to teach at U.P. many years ago was Broadcast Performance. The syllabus indicated exercises in performing in a drama, lip synching a song, and reading the newscast. I felt that there were more relevant aspects. Broadcast Journalism is a distinct need in the industry that has to be filled competently and should be a stand-alone course. My belief has been reinforced now that I have 20/20 hindsight vision, having worked in the industry for a little more than two decades. There are specific skills that need to be learned for specific areas of performance in broadcast. I concede that it is a personal bias because I cannot sing and cannot act to earn a living.

I would like to suggest that the College consider merging the journalism and broadcast communication programs. When we first offered broadcast journalism as an elective, it was refreshing to see the students challenged, focused, and motivated by the idea that becoming a reporter was THE glamorous and real job in media.

It has been said that TV is responsible for the idiotization of our generation. We admit that TV has many mistakes that need to be corrected. But there are rapid changes happening even as we speak. And as practitioners, we have no choice but to cope and improve.

What is happening to us today?

Today, TV, radio, and print are considered “old technology”. Critics say that we have now moved from the Age of Information to the Age of Empowerment.

We are all aware of the Web and its wonders – from email to blogs, to podcasting, to MP3, to text messaging, to uploading videos of your favorite pet, to YouTube, to Google, to instant research for a paper due tomorrow. The latest news is that sooner than later, all that will be available on your cellphone.

While teaching many years ago, I remember telling my class the story of my embarrassment when I attended a conference and a sheet of paper was passed around with the

request to put down our addresses. When it got to me, I was ready to write down my office address when I saw all these one-liners with a funny letter “a” with a circle around it. Everyone had an email address except me. In fact, I didn’t know that was an email address staring me in the face! Today, I wager everyone in this room has an address with a funny “a” with the circle around it. After having sufficiently embarrassed myself, I went on to share with my class the possibility that in the “near” future, we would be able to “talk” to someone through our computers, go shopping online, view movies, take “virtual tours” of anything hundreds of miles away without leaving your chair. At that time, not too long ago, it seemed like the wild imagination of a mad scientist.

Today, however, that is already a reality. And we are caught in the new technology that has opened up doors like in a game show with prizes waiting to be claimed.

What do all these advances mean for the traditional media? What are its sociological, political, and geo-political implications?

First, the “smorgasbord” of new technology offerings is the modern equivalent of the advent of TV, or the invention of the Gutenberg press. But unlike TV or the first press, it is much larger and more pervasive.

Second, it has democratized the public space. Anyone can join. If in the past, you needed a lot of money to set up your own radio and TV station, the new technology now available to us is almost free – about equivalent to the cost of a telephone.

Third, it empowers the ordinary citizen, small groups, the disenfranchised, the marginalized. We have seen the power of a single text message spreading rumors, newsbites, random information, urgent calls for help, calls to rally, greetings for all occasions keeping cellphones jumping to incessant beeps and ring tones. Our recent experience in the *Boto Mo, Ipatrol Mo* campaign of our carrying station ABS-CBN demonstrated how ordinary citizens were on-the-spot sources of news using their telephones as cameras, making them instant one-person crew on the field.

However, unlike a TV station, the new technology has no single address, making it safe from being bombed. Our own Philippine Diaspora of eight million Filipinos living overseas has utilized this new technology, connecting them to their families living abroad.

But while new technology is good news all around, there are some issues that have no definite answers just yet.

First, there is concern about the truthfulness of the content being provided by new media. Who vets the stories and how do we check if what is up there is true? What protection do you have under the law if someone maligns you on the Web? Who do you go to to seek redress?

Second, there is also concern about technology being used by terrorists not only for propaganda but also for recruitment (Siddiqui, 2007). People who monitor their websites report that their technology is only a year behind MTV.

For traditional media, it means that the formerly well-defined boundaries between the big three – print, radio, and TV – have been blurred. The buzzword is “convergence.” Stories that used to appear only on newsprint now appear on the Web. Radio that you only used to hear can now be seen on TV and heard on the Web. Regular shows that you see only on specific times according to a TV schedule can now be accessed “on demand”. Viewership studies show that less people are watching regular TV because they have now become their own TV programming directors, deciding when they want to watch through their computers.

There are “new” options and ways to access media. And our audience, once captive to us, is now faced with a multiplicity of choices. That is where our current challenge lies: How to stay relevant in the face of these new options.

As educators, we are the industry’s primary source of warm bodies. It is not fair for us to criticize what we see or hear on the air without looking at ourselves and the manner in which we shape our contribution to the industry. The mindset and consciousness

we encourage should focus on what is important – integrity, context, and relevance.

The basic need of journalism is to tell a story well. In the past, there has been too much emphasis on form. But it is really substance over form that counts. No matter how technologically advanced we become or have access to as many options within our reach, the core values of fairness, balance, accuracy, and restraint – values that are as old as the Gutenberg press – overarches even the freedom of expression we repeatedly invoke as journalists.

These values need to be burned into the consciousness of each one of us in the practice of journalism. There are efforts to put these into concrete practice. Our carrying station, ABS-CBN, has outlined specific instances in a standards and ethics manual that anchors these values in the practice of journalism. It is important that we as viewers hold the gatekeepers accountable for what they expressly state to be their objectives: transparency, accountability, and fairness.

While the Web is making inroads into our consciousness about our media options, the power to set the agenda of society still belongs to mainstream media. The latter's power to remain dominant depends largely on how credible, useful, valuable, and relevant we make our content.

I started out by saying that our 20-year ride as an independent production company has been very eventful. My life as a communicator mirrors that of an independent producer. It all started as a dream, a wish if you will, to make a difference. A lesson I learned is that you must keep your eyes focused on a goal, hold on to your beliefs, and be willing to stand by your convictions. In the end, I got more than what I bargained for.

This award today is testimony to the many people who have helped me get to where I am standing today. My teachers and mentors, friends and classmates, my students and colleagues here at the U.P. College of Mass Communication, my colleagues at the networks, my team at Probe Productions (past and present to whom this accolade rightfully belongs), and last but not least, my home

team – my family who has patiently endured the many ups and downs of this bumpy ride. I thank you all for taking the journey with me.

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